

STRATEGIC FORUM

National Defense University

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Key Points

- ◆ Syria has been in a state of sectarian civil war since early 2011. The conflict has spread to its neighbors in Iraq and Lebanon and, if left unchecked, could destabilize Turkey, Jordan, and a much wider swath of the Middle East region.
- ◆ Regardless of whether President Bashar al-Assad survives or fails, resolution of the civil war poses especially difficult problems for U.S. strategic planning at a time when the Obama administration is trying to focus on the pivot to Asia rather than the constant crises in the Middle East.
- ◆ The Syrian crisis risks redefining the traditional balance of power in the region as well as relations between the United States, regional friends, and Russia. Russia's proposal that Syria cooperate with United Nations restrictions on its chemical weapons and the unease expressed by Iran's new president over Syria's possible use of chemical weapons have raised speculation that the Syrian crisis could be resolved without U.S. military intervention.

Next Steps in Syria

by Judith S. Yaphe

Early 3 years since the start of the Syrian civil war, no clear winner is in sight. Assassinations and defections of civilian and military loyalists close to President Bashar al-Assad, rebel success in parts of Aleppo and other key towns, and the spread of violence to Damascus itself suggest that the regime is losing ground to its opposition. The tenacity of government forces in retaking territory lost to rebel factions, such as the key town of Qusayr, and attacks on Turkish and Lebanese military targets indicate, however, that the regime can win because of superior military equipment, especially airpower and missiles, and help from Iran and Hizballah. No one is prepared to confidently predict when the regime will collapse or if its opponents can win. At this point several assessments seem clear:

- ◆ The Syrian opposition will continue to reject any compromise that keeps Asad in power and imposes a transitional government that includes loyalists of the current Baathist regime. While a compromise could ensure continuity of government and a degree of institutional stability, it will almost certainly lead to protracted unrest and reprisals, especially if regime appointees and loyalists remain in control of the police and internal security services.
- ◆ How Asad goes matters. He could be removed by coup, assassination, or an arranged exile. Whether by external or internal means, building a compromise transitional government after Asad will be complicated by three factors: disarray in the Syrian opposition, disagreement among United Nations (UN) Security Council members, and an intransigent sitting government. Asad was quick to accept Russia's proposal on securing chemical weapons but may not be so accommodating should Russia or Iran propose his removal.

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◆ U.S. ambivalence has neither helped to shore up opposition to the Asad regime nor quelled the violence. While most observers acknowledge the complexity of the situation on the ground, Syria's civil war is spreading sectarian and ethnic fighting and instability to its neighbors. Religious and ethnic extremists are attacking each other as well as regime targets. Sunni and Shia extremists may be few in number, but they are able to draw on financial support from similarly minded individuals in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf, according to a Council on Foreign Relations study and interviews with regional experts.¹ Kurdish nationalists in Syria and Iraq focus more on anti-Turkish operations, which the Asad regime encourages. Extremists could grow in size and strength as the violence continues or if the United States intervenes. Fighting Asad or foreign military intervention will draw attention and give them legitimacy, whether religious or ethnic based.

It Matters How Asad Is Removed

How regime change occurs in Syria is as important as what replaces the current regime. Asad could be removed by civil war or assassination, by a military or party coup, or by an arrangement brokered by foreign powers in consultation with regional partners and with the Syrian regime and/or opposition factions. Most Syrians and Syria watchers expect there will be a degree of continuity in which elements of the regime play a role in whatever replaces the current government. This consensus on continuity reflects in part an important lesson learned from the inability of the Shia-dominated government in Iraq to win national backing and the highly diverse population in Syria, where Alawi, Kurds, Christians, and other minorities all seek parity with the Sunni Arab majority.

The Yemen Option: A Negotiated Exit. Similar to the plan negotiated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that removed Ali Abdallah Salih in Yemen, Russia and Iran would negotiate an amnesty and safe exit for Asad and his immediate family. Officials of the old

regime would assume a prominent role in the transitional government, which would be led by a “credible” regime figure with limited authority.

This option has several flaws. First, Russia claims to be interested in an international conference to include pro- and anti-regime factions, but it also continues to insist that an externally imposed solution is unacceptable. Moscow at one point hinted that it could support Syria rather than Asad, a significant shift, but it is unclear if Vladimir Putin's Syria strategy assumes Asad remains in power. It is also not clear that Russia could deliver Asad should the international community agree on a negotiated outcome that does not include him. It does seem certain, however, that the Syrian opposition would not accommodate a solution that includes amnesty for Asad and inclusion of Baathist loyalists in the new government. Asad's opponents may lack unity and clarity of purpose, but they do agree on two points: rejection of any compromise with the old regime and exclusion of Baathist loyalists in a transitional authority.

Finally, it is unlikely that Syria's neighbors most invested in the country's transition—particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia—would accept a narrow Yemen-style transition. These countries support the opposition because they prefer a broader strategic realignment that replaces a pro-Iran Shia or Alawite regime with a Sunni majority government that looks to Ankara or Riyadh for partnership. The Yemen solution removed Salih but left his family in power and granted him immunity. It was a bargain made by and for elites—not the people. The Syrian opposition is less likely to accept half-measures negotiated by a few Syrian elites and their international backers.

The Egypt Option: Removal by Coup. This option assumes there is a point at which key insiders decide that the leader's survival is more of a liability than an asset, the examples being the Egyptian army's removal of President Hosni Mubarak and his successor Mohammed Morsi. In a Syrian version of this scenario, senior leaders remain in power and Russia and Iran quickly assert their influence through them to restrict

the scope of change. They calculate that the higher the level of continuity from the old regime to a transitional authority, the greater the chance that they will remain influential. A coup, however, may produce less continuity and greater change than anticipated. Asad's successor will be under pressure from many sides to respond to broader opposition concerns and to begin a process of internal negotiation to end the crisis. He will also have to consolidate his base of support and establish his party's legitimacy, which could mean opening opportunities for some actors, including pro-U.S. or Syrian opposition supporters, and closing them for others.

The Lebanon Option: Ongoing Proxy War for Sectarian Solidarity. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states are providing money and arms to the Syrian opposition to fight Asad and Iranian-backed elements. This kind of involvement is a high-stakes gamble for the six GCC countries, which usually shun direct military engagement. They also tend to prefer the stability of a government dominated by a single strong-man military figure rather than the uncertainty of a democratically shaped Islamist government, which may not share their religious or political values. Nonetheless, support for one set of strategies has never prohibited these countries from switching tactics when their strategy fails to work. The sectarian nature of the conflict and the proxy war that characterizes Saudi and Iranian competition in Syria will ultimately perpetuate a long-term low-intensity conflict as Syrians compete for political power and foreign support along sectarian and ethnic lines similar to those that divide Lebanon.

Iraq since 2003 offers us grim images of what could go wrong in Syria if and when the government collapses. Disbanding the entire Baathist infrastructure and the military could have dire consequences in reestablishing a semblance of security and stability under a transitional government. Iran's ability to stir up local unrest using surrogate militias and other assets in Iraq should serve as a warning of what it could do in Syria if Asad's regime falls. Syria may not be Iraq, but a post-Asad Syria will not receive the same kind of intense scrutiny as post-Saddam

Iraq did under American occupation. No matter how Asad departs, a key question remains: who or what will protect Syrian citizens, especially its ethnic and religious minorities, once the state's institutions collapse?

What Do the Neighbors Want?

Syria's neighbors—Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia as well as Iran—all see risk in what is happening in Syria whether the Asad regime survives or falls. The nature of the risk runs from the spillover effect of military confrontation, refugee flows, and expanded sectarian warfare to loss of leverage over key domestic and regional security interests.

Iran: Preserving Influence, Fighting Isolation.

The Asad regime's survival has been a top national security priority for Iran. Syria has been the Islamic Republic's strongest regional ally since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Tehran has provided Damascus with weapons, money, logistics support, and strategic advice on dealing with domestic opponents while stonewalling international critics. Syria is important to Iran for geostrategic reasons: it is a key Arab and Muslim ally in a region that rejects non-Arab and non-Sunni influence; it provides Iran with a platform to support Hezbollah, Palestinian extremists, and disaffected Lebanese Christians; and it enables Iran to challenge Israel as a frontline state and disrupt efforts at Israeli-Arab rapprochement. Under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, support for the embattled Asad and his Alawite-dominated regime was also a symbol of national pride and revolutionary Islamic leadership in the face of American and Western interests.

Iran's leaders have preferred the civil war as an acceptable risk to full-scale regime change in Damascus. Some Iran scholars believe that Tehran will use every asset in its arsenal to save Asad, including support for him against foreign military intervention.² Press sources document the presence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the Quds Force fighting with Syrian and Hezbollah forces in northern and western Syria.³ Other experts believe Iran's leaders are more pragmatic;

they could accept an alternative to Asad and may even be willing to accede to a transitional government should he be removed by coup, a negotiated settlement, or even outside intervention.⁴ Iran would insist on an interim government that included Alawite and other elements friendly to Iran and recognition of Tehran as participants in any post-Asad negotiations. It would also insist that change in regime not include fundamental changes in Syria's security and military forces, with which Iran is closely linked.

Enter President Hasan Ruhani. He has made clear Iranians' distaste for Asad's repression of his people, especially his use of chemical weapons, and hinted that the Syrian leader may not be an essential element of Iran's Syrian strategy.⁵ In a speech in mid-September to commanders of the IRGC, Ruhani welcomed a possible deal between Washington and Moscow to reduce Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and warned the IRGC, with units fighting openly in Syria, not to get involved in politics.⁶

Iran does not want to see a Saudi "victory" in Syria or elsewhere in the region, but efforts to improve relations with the Arab states have failed. Egypt under the military transitional authorities and Morsi have been unwilling to improve ties, open the Suez Canal to permit passage by Iranian warships, or allow Iran access to Gaza. Iran has also tried to expand its ties to political allies in Lebanon, offering reconstruction and development assistance as well as military aid to Christian and Sunni communities.

The consequences for Iran should Asad's regime fall will be significant externally and unpredictable. Iran's standing in the Arab world had already been undermined by its denial of the Arab Spring's Arab and secular origins. The Islamic Republic could become more isolated and less able to intimidate its neighbors. It will be more difficult to transfer money and weapons to Hezbollah or retaliate against Israel. Iranian leaders before Ruhani's election were also worried that their increasingly unpopular support for Asad could rekindle domestic support for the Green Revolution protest movement of 2009. Foreign military intervention in Syria, however,

could also create opportunities for Iran to minimize its losses and even expand its regional influence.

Iraq: Managing the Syrian Crisis. The conflict in Syria presents a major dilemma for Iraq based on inextricably linked sociopolitical, tribal, ethnic, religious, and security-based ties. Many Iraqis have family, clan, and tribal connections in Syria overlaid with longstanding religious, trade, and smuggling interests. After the collapse of Saddam's regime, Syrian authorities *allegedly* facilitated the transit of armed Sunni Islamist extremists, including al Qaeda operatives and renegade Iraqi Baathists, across the border to fuel instability in Iraq.⁷ Press sources indicate that this "rat-line" has been reversed as the civil war in Syria expands, with al Qaeda in Mesopotamia and militia elements loyal to Iran, Muqtada al-Sadr, or Sunni tribal leaders now sending arms and fighters into Syria to fight for the Asad regime or against it.⁸

These linkages complicate Baghdad's policy on Syria and Asad. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who spent long years of exile in Iran and Syria, has voiced support for Asad, advised him to accept political reforms to end the crisis, and offered to mediate between Asad and his opponents. In a press interview in late February, he warned that a victory for rebels in the Syrian civil war would create a new extremist haven and destabilize the wider Middle East, sparking sectarian wars in his own country and in Lebanon. Maliki stated:

If the world does not agree to support a peaceful solution through dialogue . . . then I see no light at the end of the tunnel. Neither the opposition nor the regime can finish each other off. The most dangerous thing in this process is that if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in Lebanon, divisions in Jordan and a sectarian war in Iraq.⁹

The issue for most Iraqis is national interest, not sectarian identity. Maliki and most Iraqis see themselves as Iraqis and Arabs first. They criticize the Asad regime's brutality, Baathist origins, and lack of accountability. Their greater worry, however, is that Asad could be replaced by a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated gov-

ernment encouraged by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar and eager to destabilize neighborhood regimes that are Sunni or insufficiently Shia.

Iraq remains too divided by sectarian politics and weakened by its own security challenges to fend off Iranian pressure to support its Syrian client. Over time, however, this calculation may change. Maliki will need to weigh carefully the costs of supporting Iran in Syria against the costs to Iraqi security should Asad's regime fail. Iran will place a much higher value on a compliant government in Baghdad if Asad falls and Iraq becomes Iran's new strategic depth against the United States, Israel, and Western influence in the Middle East. This could have serious security and economic consequences as Baghdad struggles to assert greater power under a centralized government, expand oil production and exports, and strengthen its military capabilities.

Sectarianism as a Unifier and Divider. The Arab Spring permitted long-suppressed grievances among religious and ethnic groups to come to light. Sunni and Shia, Muslim and Christian, religious and secular, Arab and Kurd were all initially part of the new discourse in Cairo's Tahrir Square and in Baghdad. Muslim Brotherhood parties and more extremist Salafi elements soon replaced the secular-minded moderates of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya and began to play a significant role in the opposition to Asad. The initial political success of President Morsi, the Brotherhood, and more radical Salafi elements in Egypt warned Syria's Arab neighbors of what Syria without Asad could become. Morsi appointed Brotherhood members to senior government posts, supported a constitution reflecting the Brotherhood's agenda, and asserted his control over parliament and the supreme court. For many Egyptians, he clearly favored sectarian values and interests over a nationalist or democratic model. Would he insist on rigid enforcement of shariah law? Would he protect the rights of all citizens, including minorities? Would his party concede power if it lost the next election? Morsi was soon under siege from the military, which

he had purged after his election, and from Salafis, who warned that harder-line, anti-democratic elements would come to power. The military's removal of Morsi was a dangerous moment in Egyptian politics, but it was also a warning to the neighborhood of the future under sectarian rule.

Most experts familiar with Arab political history and popular culture discount the idea of a resurgent pan-Arab or pan-Sunni nationalism linking Muslim Brotherhood or other Salafi parties that have come to power or have a significant presence in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and the Maghreb. They note the differences in national identity, interests, culture, religious custom, and ambivalence regarding total Islamist control of state institutions and political culture. But the issue lies as well with foreign intervention. Much of the responsibility or blame for the Islamist parties' success in Egypt and Syria is credited to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who sheltered Brotherhood members during their long years of exile from Syria and Egypt. Responsibility for their lack of cooperation is also placed with Riyadh and Doha. Brotherhood and Salafi loyalists have long been at odds, with Qatar backing Brotherhood affiliates and the Saudis favoring more extremist Salafi groups. Iran as a Shia state is seen as sectarian, encouraging Shia communities in Arab Gulf states to demand a share of power and threatening their Arab rulers for denying it.

GCC Support Is a Mixed Blessing. Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states are autocracies whose political, social, and foreign policy behavior is shaped by traditional conservative tribal and religious values. Their reaction to the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria reflects these interests and values. They worry that Islamists in Syria will encourage domestic critics to demand greater political participation and social change. The GCC states find their best defense in their oil wealth and the ability it gives them to buy off unhappy citizens with promises of more jobs, higher wages, better housing, and subsidies whether they are needed or not. Their wealth, along with citizen acceptance of a benevolent autocracy, allows the ruling families to ignore demands for accountability,

greater popular participation in governance, and a more open economy.

The GCC has no uniform political or security policies and foreign relations are tailored mostly to state-specific interests rather than GCC concerns. They do, however, share a common threat perception: all feel threatened by the Shia political takeover in Iraq, the civil war in Syria, and Iran's looming shadow as a militant state whose aggressive regional stance includes using sectarian polarization to spark domestic unrest in their countries. The Gulf states actively confront Iranian interests in the region through careful monitoring of Iranian activities (especially those centered on recruitment efforts and operational planning), security cooperation, and the specter of sectarianism, which is intended to rally popular support and paint opponents and critics as disloyal.

Gulf aid in Syria has gone to a number of factions fighting the Asad regime. There is no set standard for how the GCC states choose whom to support and whom to ignore in the conflict. They probably know little about their clients or their reliability. It is not enough to be a pious Muslim and loyal to conservative Sunni principles. GCC support for proxies to challenge Iran's allies in Syria has proved difficult to confine to those who are trustworthy as proxies or who follow a patron's policies.

The GCC monarchies are playing a complex game in which their influence and ultimate survival are at stake. Yet in all of them few people outside the ruling families and dominant sect are in charge of decision-making on foreign or security policy, and any radical reorientation of policy or institutions that could affect family interests is not to be tolerated. During the events marking the Arab Spring, all of the GCC countries experienced some degree of unrest, and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) deployed GCC military units to Bahrain to "protect infrastructure" and prevent any threat to destabilize the government. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE provided direct military support against the Qadhafi regime and urged North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to remove him.

The red line for the GCC states is unrest on the Peninsula itself, in Bahrain or Yemen, but not civil war in Syria. GCC leaders blame Iran for all the unrest in the Gulf, including Bahrain, and they pledge money to many states to keep them "secure." Their funding of the proxy war with Iran in Syria does not increase the likelihood of military conflict between Sunni Arab states and Iran. They were quick to congratulate Ruhani on his election to the Iranian presidency in June and to recognize and reward the Egyptian military's removal of Morsi and the Brotherhood from public office.

What Do Russia and China Want?

When the Syrian crisis began, U.S. and European policymakers assumed that armed intervention would lead to fragmentation and civil war. Moscow argued this as well. Its support has been critical in helping Asad hang onto power and many now assume that the longer the Asad regime holds on, the more likely it is that he will survive. What does Russia want? Moscow might be satisfied with a negotiated outcome that would include it, Iran, and possibly China in talks similar to those held in Bonn that produced the Karzai government in Afghanistan. Some even see this as a way to resolve broader issues, including drawing Iran into a process that could then be linked to progress on nuclear issues. It is doubtful that this "Grand Bazaar"-style approach could resolve Syria's woes quickly or satisfactorily, nor is it likely to convince Moscow or Beijing to come to the table. The Russians would like to delay a resolution in Syria to maintain as much continuity as possible between old and new governments and to preserve Russian interests and influence. Moscow wants to remain Syria's great power ally, but a prolonged proxy war could divide the country and limit Russia's overall influence there.

Similarly, China opposes foreign military intervention in principle but is not likely to do anything to prevent it. China has little economic or strategic interest in Syria. It opposes the use of military force and a declaration of no-fly zones and safe havens for rebels as happened in Libya. China will back Russia in expectation

that Russia will support it on matters that are important to China.

The question of whose interests must be satisfied or sacrificed is a primary one. Is it important to offer Russia, China, and Iran inclusion in the process of determining the post-Asad transition? What is the price to be paid for offering them inclusion? Would Syrians, the Gulf Arabs, and Turkey find this kind of bargain acceptable or useful? The cost to U.S. interests could prove too high for a bargain that could not be kept. Finally, what happens if the timetable on the ground in Syria outpaces the slowness of the international negotiating process? Time may not be on the side of international mediation or engagement. As the crisis continues, Russia could become increasingly irrelevant. It could use its veto in the UN, but events on the ground and not in New York will determine what happens in Syria.

What Could Go Wrong?

What could change these assumptions? What are we missing? Several questions need to be addressed.

Do Tribes Matter? Tribes—membership in them, loyalty to them—define political identity and reality in many areas of the Middle East. States observe the geographic boundaries laid out nearly 100 years ago, but several large tribal confederations include constituent parts living and trading in countries that are occasionally antagonistic.¹⁰ These tribes have complex ties to influential families and political leaders that cross borders and histories. According to press reports and interviews with Iraqi political leaders, Sunni Arab tribes of western Iraq support the Syrian uprising in hopes of ending Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq, returning Syria to Sunni leadership and boosting their leverage with Baghdad. Others may be assisting the Asad regime in return for favors from Damascus during the Iraqi surge of 2005–2007.

Tribal constituencies are essential for Asad as well, especially those in eastern Syria and areas south of Damascus. They may be as much as 20 percent of Syria's population; they are armed (guns, not tanks), have loyal followers, and are situated in the heart of Syria's hydrocarbon

infrastructure. Syria's tribes are governed by a consultative and hierarchical process, but once a decision is made, it is definitive. Both Saddam and the Asads gave the tribes autonomy in exchange for support, but Bashar al-Assad does not have as substantial a tribal presence as his father had. Military intelligence monitors the tribes but may not be able to contain them. Their influence in Syria and Iraq and the flow of arms to them will probably grow as security conditions worsen and government control weakens.

Does the Baath Party or Another Political Ideology Matter? Probably not. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia is thinking in strictly ideological or sectarian terms. For the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs, stability takes precedence over democracy as a desirable endstate. They offered Egypt's military financial assistance soon after Mubarak and Morsi were removed by the military in hopes that authoritarian rule would secure the stability that eluded political parties, even Islamist ones. Iran under Ahmadinejad wanted to deny victory in Syria to the Saudis and their U.S. backers. Ruhani, however, has put a high priority on rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, which could be impeded by Iran's current policy on Syria.

What Do the Kurds Want? Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iran watched enviously as Iraq's Kurds made significant gains in getting external protection and ultimately acquiring status as a self-governing province within the new Iraqi state. Kurdish unity is a powerful rallying cry, but the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria speak different dialects, follow different leaders, and often set opposing priorities for themselves and other Kurdish factions.

Syrian Kurds belong primarily to either the Kurdish National Council (KNC) or the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or PYD), a branch of the anti-Turkish Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerê Kurdistan, or PKK) that is based in northern Iraq and operates primarily against Turkish targets. More than one-third of the PKK is Syrian Kurdish. Few Syrian Kurds have joined the Arab opposition to Asad, although a Syrian Kurd was named president of the exile Syrian National Council in 2012 in an effort by the predominantly Arab Sunni opposition to more actively include them. The Kurds give

many reasons for ignoring anti-Asad movements. They reject political groups that are by definition Arab and they distrust the Muslim Brotherhood, which dominates the opposition movement, for its Turkish links. The PYD/PKK uses the Asad regime to sustain its radical Kurdish nationalist agenda and anti-Turkish operations. The Asad government, in turn, encourages—and arms—several Kurdish extremist factions to destabilize Turkey and undermine the Syrian opposition.

Syrian Kurdish political demands can be seen on a spectrum from assimilation into a new Syrian state to self-rule or outright independence. The KNC has said it is interested in federalism and political decentralization, which suggests an autonomous Kurdish government to apply wherever a Kurd is. More inclusively, this would suggest the confessional style of politics in Lebanon, but hardline Kurdish independents may seek the ethnogeographic division of Iraq. Regardless, Syria's Kurds seem unwilling or unable to articulate how their vision for a new state would work in practice. They will probably reject any post-Asad settlement or transitional government in which Turkey has been involved, but they have few alternatives. Encouraged by Ankara, Iraq's Kurdish leader Masud Barzani has tried to woo Syria's Kurds into cooperation, but he has had little success in part because of his ties to Turkey and in part because of his own ambitions to gamble for an independent Kurdish state.

Syria's Kurds are unlikely to play a significant role in ending or rescuing Asad's regime, but they are armed and dangerous and could pose a major challenge to a post-Asad government. Whatever their ambitions or hopes, Turkey will oppose any moves by Syria's Kurds to acquire any form of self-rule. Syrian Kurdish factions signed an accord in 2012 at the encouragement of Iraqi Kurdish leaders to unify as a means of better attaining Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Despite that, it is unlikely that the PKK/PYD will take orders from Barzani or the KNC. Internal power struggles within Syrian Kurdish groups are likely to continue within Syria's political vacuum.

Should We Worry about Hizballah or al Qaeda? Hizballah is directly involved in military operations inside

Syria in defense of the Asad regime according to press accounts and its leader Hassan Nasrallah.¹¹ Hizballah shifted from a low-profile, high-deniability strategy to high-profile engagement when the Syrian military was unable to hold off rebel advances. Nasrallah's statement acknowledged for the first time that the organization's military wing was fighting on behalf of Asad in Syria. In a virtual declaration of war on al Qaeda and other Sunni extremist factions, Nasrallah warned, "If Syria falls, the Palestinian cause will be lost," and, he predicted, Israel then will enter Lebanon.

Hizballah is a critical component of Iran's deterrent posture. Preserving Asad is extremely important, but without assistance from Tehran and Moscow, Hizballah probably can do little more to protect him. The costs would be high and their resources are limited. Some experts believe that threats of attack from Israel keep Hizballah from trying to remove advanced weapons or technology from Syria, but no one interviewed would guess the level of fear required to keep Hizballah from smuggling weapons into or out of Syria or the degree of its loyalty to Iran should it be ordered to do so. One military expert said Hizballah's leaders view the possession of chemical weapons more as a hazard or burden than an asset. He believes Iran would have to direct them to get involved with nonconventional weapons. If Hizballah were to do so and if Israel were to retaliate, then the expert warned, the violence would be hard to contain. "The Syrian crisis," he stated, "would almost be an afterthought."

Sunni extremist factions, such as al Qaeda, are a small part of the Syrian opposition movement. They operate from bases in Lebanon and Iraq with fighters and weapons crossing into Syria and Syria launching retaliatory attacks on their sites in Lebanon. Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia was once encouraged by Asad to cross into Iraq to launch attacks aimed at destabilizing the country after the collapse of Saddam's government; now it is re-entering Syria to attack government targets. Leaders of the Syrian extremist Jabhat al-Nusra and the Iraqi-based al Qaeda announced earlier this

year that they would unite efforts, but al Qaeda leader Shaykh Zawahiri and al-Nusra denied this. Al Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra's presence remains relatively small and they must compete with other factions for resources. This could change if violence escalates, if al Qaeda leaders in Iraq or Yemen see an opportunity to establish a base in ungoverned space in Syria, or if foreign forces intervene in Syria.

Does Asad Have an Exit Strategy? Bashar al-Assad is described as moody, unpredictable, irrational, and Janus-faced. One scholar stated, "He will say one thing in the morning and another in the afternoon." Asad himself said in his interview with PBS's Charlie Rose that casualties, referring to 100,000 dead in the civil war, are irrelevant in a war that is total. Some believe the breakup of Syria is inevitable and that Asad and Alawi allies will eventually retreat to the Syrian coast, possibly to Latakia, an area dominated by Alawis between the coast and the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

Similarly, little is known about the probable fate of Alawis and other prominent Syrians supporting Asad should he retreat or be removed. The Alawite minority comprises about 10 percent of the country and is the heart of Asad's support base. They govern the provinces and control his military-security services. Many are politically radicalized, extremely loyal, and have access to Syria's nonconventional weapons systems. They are also probably worried about their fate should the Asad regime fall and a Sunni-dominated government take over. Some Alawis might hope for amnesty under a successor regime, but many probably would suspect this as a ploy and join the Shabiha elements used by the regime in local battles to initiate a bloody post-Asad insurgency.

What if a desperate Asad, looking for a way to retaliate or divert attention away from his internal woes, attacks Israel or Jordan as a last gasp? What if Asad decides to attack refugee safe havens in Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey? Are Palestinians in Jordan and Syria tools that Asad could use to threaten Israel and Jordan? No one knows at what point the Syrian leader may feel the need to resort to extreme measures, but his strategy is survival.

He does not appear to have an exit strategy other than winning through military confrontation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An expert on Syria described the country as "the most begrudging society in the Middle East. It is not like any of its neighbors, with the possible exception of Iraq. It is a minority regime in a country of minorities." Solutions that recall Syria's colonial era or an elite-level deal with foreign powers, which allows the Asad regime a role in a transitional authority, probably would not last, he concluded: "Even if you break off a chunk of the regime, you need the people to agree to it or else they will not leave the street. If we have a negotiated exit, who steps in? It's nothing like Yemen; you can't get around the sectarian nature of the regime."

It is difficult to conclude from a few interviews and assessments that a simple, straight-forward negotiated settlement of Syria's political crisis is possible in the short term. Nor is there much evidence to suggest that Syria's diverse ethnic and religious communities will be able to resolve their differences and successfully manage a post-Asad transitional government. As military confrontations continue, many of these communities are growing increasingly isolated and desperate. Collapse of the regime could magnify the risk of retaliation and blood feuds, tribal warfare, and, as in Iraq, insurgencies fueled by religious or ethnic extremists who are well-armed and ill-disciplined.

Nevertheless, a possible solution may lie in a settlement negotiated and monitored by an international consortium under UN or Arab League monitors that establishes a ruling coalition. This ruling coalition could include bureaucrats and technocrats from the Baathist regime, members of the exiled Syrian opposition movement, and most significantly a cross-section of prominent Syrian civilian and military leaders willing to work together in a transitional administration. This may preserve institutional integrity and a functional national command authority, but the prospect of a peaceful transition along these lines is doubtful. Like Russia and Iraq after revolution, exiles are

unlikely to be welcomed back to run the country. Moreover, the opposition groups thus far appear incapable of overcoming individual differences and internecine rivalries to establish a unified position. This bodes poorly for their ability to govern the country. Iraq's post-Saddam governments survived to a great extent because of the American occupation, but even Americans' obsession with the rule of law and proportional representation could not prevent the rise of militias and insurgency. There seems to be even less international consensus on or in Syria than there was in Iraq. Syria's neighbors are looking to the United States and the other NATO countries to lead in removing Asad, but no one appears to have the will or courage to assume responsibility.

A Syrian expert who worked on *The Day After Asad Project* for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) believes the regime is a broader group than just the Asad family and that institutional frameworks, such as the security apparatus, the military, the justice sector, and police forces will survive the removal of the regime. A key challenge will be figuring out what elements of the regime could play a productive role. For other Syria watchers, the key is not the institutional framework but its control by the same elements that ran it under Asad and are complicit in his regime's repressive measures. Syria has long been governed most intimately by multiple branches of the security services, which report directly to the Asad family and are complicit in the regime's actions. Should these elements remain, large swaths of Syrian society may reject the entire government, extending the country's instability into the postconflict rebuilding process. Will lessons from Iraq or the recommendations from the USIP study be sufficient to prevent civil war or ethnic cleansing by armed Syrian militias? Probably not.

What to do about Syria is an especially difficult issue for the United States at a time when U.S. forces are withdrawing from the region and the Obama administration is looking to pivot attention toward Asia. President Obama's recent pledge of military aid may be sufficient to create a pause in the fighting while both sides reassess their ability to continue the war or seek a cease-fire, but it is not likely

to resolve the basic conflict or bring peace. It is unlikely to weaken either side's resolve to change the regime or save it. Most experts interviewed believed that "these things inside Syria are going to happen regardless, but if we continue doing nothing, many trends will continue to get worse." If Asad leaves power or stays in a nominal role, a large part of society will remain close to his regime, especially among the Alawite community, whose members fear Sunni retribution. Their fight for survival will continue, one scholar observed: "After forty years of ruling the country, the Alawites will not be content with walking away. It will be messy."

The U.S. delay in delivering military aid to the Syrian opposition has probably cost it some leverage in the region, especially with governments seeing Asad's survival as a direct threat to their security. Countries with Muslim Brotherhood members in positions of influence need foreign aid and trade to survive, but their willingness to accept American support or loans from international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund or World Bank will be tempered by their need to show independence of great powers and refusal to accede to reforms or end subsidies often required by foreign borrowing. They will watch the situation in Egypt most closely to see if the Brotherhood can regain power despite efforts to break it,¹² if the military turns power over to civilian authority and allows free and fair elections, and if the United States and wealthy Arab donors continue to back the military and exert influence on political succession. Whatever happens in Egypt and Syria, the United States will be held responsible. Our victory in Iraq did not ensure a compliant succession or a smooth transition to democratic rule or national reconciliation, both necessary if there is to be hope for an end to sectarian war.

The options for the end of Asad laid out in the beginning of this paper remain the most likely ones. A negotiated exit and settlement may be the most preferable option for the United States and the international community, but the most likely one is some version of the Arab option: a prolonged civil war, whether by proxy or not, fought on sectarian and/or ethnic terms with the patron/sponsor having little influence over the outcome.

Despite its announcement of limited engagement in Syria in support of the opposition, U.S. policy remains unclear and undeclared to many observers. Does America's new-found concern for containing Syria's chemical weapons and promises of military aid to the opposition promise greater engagement if Asad's forces stabilize the battlefield, retake more territory, cross another red line, and rout the Free Syrian Army (FSA)? Or is the U.S. goal to give the FSA just enough support to level the playing field to the point where both sides opt for a cease-fire and negotiations? If so, the United States may be creating a quagmire in which more, not less, military support and involvement becomes inevitable as the fighting spreads further into Lebanon and Iraq and possibly threatens Israel as well.

Several specific recommendations for U.S. engagement are in order:

- ◆ Be clear on goals. If the goal is a military victory, then further support to include advanced equipment may become necessary, but the danger will be that the United States slips into backing a full-blown war. If the goal is to equalize the battlefield and bring both sides to negotiations, then the level of military and financial aid must be carefully calibrated to maintain a balance. This, however, requires cooperation from Asad's backers, Russia and Iran, and would come at a cost to U.S. interests.

- ◆ Decide if the benefits of a broader strategy outweigh a purely Syrian strategy. Trading Russian and Iranian cooperation on Syria for compromise on non-Syrian issues may not be worth the cost of ending the Syrian crisis. Be prepared for this strategy to fail because of Syrian resentment of what will be seen as neocolonial intervention in their internal affairs and because the Russians lack the influence to deliver the deal.

- ◆ Promote the Syrian Opposition Coalition¹³ and its military partner, the FSA, and insist they form a government in exile or, if practical, on liberated Syrian territory. Syrians may spurn efforts by exiles to return and join the transitional government, but they need the talent, money and expertise of the exile community. Syrians from inside

and outside the country need to be seen participating in their liberation and implementing transitional justice measures to protect civil society and as a way to create a watchdog on the other side's postwar behavior.

- ◆ Urge the international community to support an interim government and monitor domestic compliance with international norms of protection to civilians. The Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, and European Union (EU) should support an armed UN peacekeeping mission that would offer assurances of protection to all Syrians, including Alawis and minorities, in a post-Asad Syria. This force would protect the transitional government and offer amnesty to regime supporters, excluding those responsible for crimes against the Syrian people. The benefit for Syrians is no retaliation for past crimes, except for crimes against humanity. Terms would include arrest and trial for violators.

- ◆ Continue humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees. The aid could extend to the establishment of safe haven zones inside Syria and might require a no-fly, no-drive zone similar to the protection afforded the Kurds in northern Iraq in 1991. U.S. efforts would be strengthened, but not assured, if backed by the UN, Arab League, and EU. The risk would be that extended support to Syrian opposition bases inside Syria would be used by the opposition to bring more international military forces directly into the fighting.

- ◆ Reach out to Asad's domestic support base. Fear of retribution may outweigh fear of sanctions for Sunni Arab, Christian, and other minorities, but the United States needs to convince them it is too costly to keep siding with Asad. Syrians may be more encouraged to defect if the U.S. military were engaged in operations and they believed Moscow and Washington were willing to guarantee postconflict security.

- ◆ Make clear U.S. and international intolerance for religious and political extremism and terrorism. Also make clear that efforts by terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda to cross borders to disrupt or destabilize any country are unacceptable.

With red lines comes responsibility for monitoring and punishing infractions. Great attention and sympathy are focused on the fate of innocent civilians, but Asad clearly links collateral damage to retribution.¹⁴ Syrians may be reluctant to break with the regime, but the point is to make it more dangerous and costly to support the regime than break with it.

The current political turmoil in Turkey and Egypt is not likely to have much effect on Asad or the Syrian civil war. The election of Hasan Ruhani, a cleric, former diplomat and nuclear negotiator, to the presidency in Iran, however, could present an opportunity to change the course of the civil war. Tehran's support for Asad has raised questions among Iranians, including some officials, who not only see Asad as a dictator but also believe his opponents are "dominated by extremist groups with frightening agendas." He cautions that "Syria is a matter of national security and that's why the president can't solely manage it. It has to be discussed with the supreme leader, the Revolutionary Guards and the National Security Council."

Notes

¹ Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (a.k.a. Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria)," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, October 2013, available at <www.cfr.org/Iraq/al-qaeda-iraq-k-islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811>.

² Professor Mohsen Milani (University of South Florida), interview by author, July 2012 and June 2013.

³ See Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, available at <www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkinst?printable=true&c>; see also Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon, and Sam Dagher, "Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2013, A1, available at <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984.html>>.

⁴ Iranian scholars, interview by author, February and September 2012.

⁵ Cited by Deutsche Presse-Agentur, September 16, 2013, but not seen in any other press report.

⁶ Jason Rezaian, "Iranian leader responds to Syria weapons deal," *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2013, A20; "Stay out of politics, Rowhani tells Iran Revolutionary Guards," *Arab News*, September 17, 2013.

⁷ After a car bombing in Baghdad in 2006, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki claimed Syria had trained al Qaeda and other foreign fighters before sending them to Iraq. In 2009, Baghdad and Damascus recalled their ambassadors after the government of Iraq accused Syria of sheltering Iraqis responsible for bomb attacks. See "Syria and Iraq," *GlobalSecurity.org*, October 10, 2013, available at <www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/forrel-iraq.htm>.

⁸ See Jessica Stern, "Iraq: Where Terrorists Go to School," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2013, available at <www.nytimes.com/2013/03/20/opinion/iraq-a-school-for-terrorists>; and Masters.

⁹ "Iraq Prime Minister warns of Syria Crisis Spillover," *Al-Jazeera*, February 20, 2013, available at <www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/02/201322812730766202.html>. See also Ned Parker and Raheem Salman, "Notes from the Underground: The Rise of Nouri al-Maliki," *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2013.

¹⁰ The Shammar, a tribal confederation of several million in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, are primarily Sunni but include Shia components as well.

¹¹ Anne Barnard, "In Syrian Victory, Hezbollah Risks Broader Fight," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2013, A1; Karl Vick, "The Fall of al-Qusayr: Capture of Strategic Syrian Town Marks a New Phase in the War," *Time.com*, June 5, 2013, available at <world.time.com/2013/06/05/the-fall-of-qusayr-capture-of-strategic-syrian-town>.

¹² By mid-September, the successor government under General al-Sisi had arrested many of the Brotherhood's and banned the organization. Morsi himself is under arrest and may be tried for crimes allegedly stemming from his 2011 imprisonment. Mubarak is under house arrest but may be retried.

¹³ The exact title of the Syrian Opposition Coalition is the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which was created from the Syrian National Coalition.

¹⁴ Bashar al-Assad, interview by Charlie Rose, *PBS NewsHour*, September 8, 2013, available at <www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/09/Asad-tells-pbs-charlie-rose-syria-prepared-to-retaliate-if-hit.html>.

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